

## Three Times A Charm

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**Think your chances of being zinged by lightning are about the same as being abducted by aliens? Think again. Perry Humble, a retired Army aviator, tells how he went three rounds with the big "zapper" and lived to tell the tale.**

### Round One—Hosed!

When you live in southern Alabama, it's nice every so often to wash your car so you remember what the paint looks like. If it's a summer afternoon and you time it just right, Mother Nature will often send a brief monsoon for your "final rinse." Rain, however, isn't the only thing she sends from the skies. As Perry was scrubbing his car one afternoon, he heard the rumble of thunder. He decided curtailing his car washing sooner rather than later was the best course of action and headed across the yard to the spigot. Little did he know he was in for an "enlightening" experience.

"I was reaching down to turn off the spigot with my left hand while holding the nozzle in my right hand. As I turned the spigot, I saw a flash and heard a loud boom."

When he woke up, he was on his back several feet from the spigot with his dog howling next to him. He checked himself for burns but found only a little white dust on his fingertips. His heart was OK, but that didn't mean he'd escaped unscathed. The jolt tightened his muscles so badly he could barely open his hands.

And just how did Perry get zapped? Lightning hit the water main and traveled through his plumbing to the spigot.

**Lessons learned:** If you can hear thunder, you're within range of lightning. Avoid all water sources in and around your home. Don't take baths or showers and stay away from all water fixtures, including the toilet.

Perry survived round one, albeit zinged and slightly dinged. However, they say people who've survived a close call with lightning attract future bolts like a magnet. That, or maybe it's just lightning trying to finish the job.

### Round Two—A special "afterglow"

Perry's second experience came after he'd left active duty and was helping his dad move mobile homes. He and a friend were splitting a doublewide in half so it could be moved. While his friend removed the cap on top of the trailer, Perry, wearing leather gloves and rubber-soled boots, knelt on the ground, separating the halves with a hydraulic jack. Behind him stood several oak trees with exposed roots, some running beneath the trailer. Suddenly his partner yelled, "There's a thunderstorm coming—put the trailer back together!"

Perry frantically worked the jack to rejoin the halves to prevent rain from damaging the interior. Suddenly, there was a loud boom as lightning hit one of the trees behind him. The bolt went through the tree's roots and into the mobile home. Perry said the sight was surreal. "I saw what looked like electricity running through the trailer's frame rails and axles. It went through the jack, up the handle and covered my right arm."

The charge knocked him backward, but he wasn't hurt. However, not wanting to tempt fate, he jumped into a large truck to wait out the storm.



**Lessons learned:** Trees aren't stingy; they'll share the wealth if you're nearby when lightning strikes. Also, it pays to wear personal protective equipment like heavy gloves and rubber-soled boots if you work outdoors.

Perry finished round two with a new appreciation for how effectively tree roots conduct electricity, especially when there's an inviting metal object nearby. However, lightning wasn't done with him yet. Not discouraged after two near misses, it took a shot at him where he thought he was safest.

## **Round Three—You can run, but you can't hide!**

Perry was in his workshop with his son one afternoon when a storm appeared suddenly. Concerned about tornadoes, he and his son beat feet to their home. Running through the rain, they flew through the kitchen door and into the living room. As they did, lightning either hit the house or very near it. What happened looked like something from a Stephen King movie. "There was a waist-high, gray-purple haze settling on the floor throughout the house," Perry said. "You could feel the electricity tingling, like when your hair stands on end."

Round three, fortunately, didn't result in injuries or damage—but it was scary!

**Lessons learned:** In the Southeast, dry, sandy soil can keep normal lightning rods from working well. More extensive systems such as buried wire loop encircling a house and surge protectors between the utility meter and home might be needed.

Will there be a fourth round? Only time will tell. However, to keep lightning from knocking you out, the National Lightning Safety Institute offers the following tips:

### **If outdoors**

- Avoid water, high ground and open spaces.
- Avoid all metal objects including electric wires, fences, machinery, motors and power tools.
- Avoid taking shelter beneath canopies, small picnic or rain shelters or near trees. Wherever possible, find shelter in a substantial building or in a fully enclosed metal vehicle. Make sure the vehicle's windows are shut completely.
- If lightning is striking nearby, crouch down and put your feet close together. Cover your ears to minimize hearing damage from thunder, and stay at least 15 feet away from other people.

### **If indoors**

- Avoid water and stay away from doors and windows.
- Don't use land-line telephones or wear headsets.
- Turn off, unplug and stay away from electrical appliances, computers, power tools and TV sets. Lightning might strike exterior electric and phone lines and send a powerful electric shock inside a building.

Finally, just because the sky is clear doesn't mean you're safe. Wait at least 30 minutes after the last flash or boom before resuming normal activities.

## **---Did You Know**

Ben Franklin came up with the idea of lightning rods more than 200 years ago, and this invention has helped save millions of homes from damaging or deadly strikes. For more information on home lightning protection, visit this University of Florida Web site: <http://www.napa.ufl.edu/2002news/lightningrod.htm>.

